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Teaching Gender Diversity in Preschool Classrooms

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As early as toddler years, children are absorbing information about gender stereotypes on what they should and should not be doing based solely off their sex and “have typically come to prefer activities defined by the culture as appropriate for their sex” (Wolter & Hannover, 2016, p.683). I thought it was important to start coming up with age appropriate ways to explain the concept of gender to children and teach preschool children about acceptance of differences in one another as well as themselves. For my project, I created a two-day lesson plan that was meant to be an introduction on speaking about gender diversity in preschool classrooms. To introduce this topic, I used the book *Sparkle Boy* by Leslea Newman, which is about a boy who expresses himself through non-gender conforming clothes. The protagonist in the story is one example of an individual who may be apart of the LGBTQ+ community.

Needs Statement

Gender stereotyping emerges hand in hand with the development of gender identity in early childhood. As children are just understanding the differences in boys and girls, they are also being held to a standard by society of how they should and should not act, how they should dress, and what activities they should enjoy all based off their gender. In the past, these stereotypes were celebrated and seen as being good but as time has gone on, research has found that it actually can cause many “dysfunctional consequences” (Bigler & Liben, 1990). Gender stereotypes can not only interfere with a child’s ability to process and remember events, stories, or interactions with others, but it can also constrain the expression of the child’s own personal interests and skills (Bigler & Liben, 1990).

In today’s progressive new age, there is a need to change the views on how society sees gender and the stereotypes society tends to put on children at an early age. Children develop their

gender schemas through their environments like their home life, school, and what they see through media (Goble, Martin, Hanish, & Fabes, 2012). This means that if a child is exposed to environments that follow these gender stereotypes, the child will most likely take on these gender norms and view others and themselves with gender stereotypes. This can be of concern because if they follow these gender norms there could be some false understanding of what boys and girls are capable of doing and it also may exclude individuals who do not necessarily fall under those gender-norm stereotypes.

A way to help solve this problem would be by creating a curriculum in early education classrooms that can help students understand gender as a spectrum and that stereotypes are not always correct nor are they an accurate representation of what gender is. I plan to provide a two-day lesson plan about gender fluidity and acceptance of differences for preschool age children. The lesson I created fulfills this need of gender diverse education because it is introducing gender as a spectrum to preschoolers and teaching them ways to accept differences in others without judgement.

Literature Review

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally, by infancy, children in the United States are highly knowledgeable about what is culturally defined as masculine versus feminine, including toys and occupations (Giraldo & Coylar, 2011). By age three and four, many children are able to easily identify or label themselves as either a boy or girl and have an idea of their gender identity. Additionally, children start to recognize social norms and what is and is not socially appropriate behavior for boys and girls (Giraldo & Coylar, 2011). Gender schema theory (GST), which was introduced by Sandra Bem in 1981, focuses on many properties of gender. One focal element is children's

differential engagement with objects and activities depending on whether a certain object or activity is considered to be self-relevant. The child's "self-relevance depends on their knowledge about what is culturally defined as "for girls" versus "for boys" and, second, their self-identification as girls or boys" (Coyle & Liben, 2016, p.1). GST asserts that boys and girls approach objects, activities, and peers that are more culturally and socially acceptable as normal for their gender and then tend to avoid those same things for the opposite gender (Coyle & Liben, 2016). Although GST asserts that children should gravitate toward same-sex objects, activities, and peers, their viewpoints of what is considered same-sex are still malleable. In our society, children have been taking social cues from others around them- but that also means that children could broaden the activities they participate in, the peers they surround themselves with, and the objects they use.

My project adds representation in the class because the book *Sparkle Boy* could potentially serve as mirror for some of the students who read the story or other books with similar content. Through normalizing the conversation of gender diversity and discussing underrepresented groups in class, students could feel encouraged to continue the conversation and also feel more accepted in their classrooms and become more inclined of accepting others. Having representation in the classroom matters because the absence of diverse learning material, more specifically LGBTQ+ materials, sends a message to students that as a society we support and encourage heterosexism exclusively (Hudson, 2014). The lack of LGBTQ+ representation in schools is a problem because children actually obtain knowledge from the things they learn in textbooks and other learning material they are given in school. Therefore, the textbooks and learning materials that are provided in schools "send messages about what and who is worthy of study and consideration in academics" (Hudson, 2014). Having diverse representation of gender

introduced to students at an early age through the materials that they are given in school is important so that children are able to grow to be understanding and accepting individuals. It is also important so that children who identify with being LGBTQ can feel represented more in their curriculum.

Due to a growing understanding of gender-diverse orientations, traditional notions of “boy” and “girl” activities should be reconsidered. Children who identify with being gender-fluid or gender-diverse often experience binary gender expectations, bullying and harassment in school. An event in *Sparkle Boy* that encapsulates this is at the end of the story when the protagonist is confronted with a few people who pick on him for dressing like a girl. Some examples of gender expectations that individuals may be forced to follow are gender labeled bathrooms, locker rooms, girl and boy lines, dress codes, etc. According to the 2015 National School Climate Survey put on by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), it states that 57.6% of students who identify as LGBTQ+ feel unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation. 43.3% of students said it is because of how they choose to express their gender. Children should not be afraid to go to school, a learning environment should be safe, open, and welcoming. While this is what should be the goal of schools, in most cases it is not. 85.2% of LGBTQ students reported experiencing verbal harassment like being called names or threatened at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. 59.6% of LGBTQ students reported being sexually harassed and 66.2% reported personally experiencing any LGBT- related discriminatory practices at school (GLSEN, 2015).

The effects of a hostile school environment for these LGBTQ+ students results in “having worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being” (GLSEN, 2015). In one particular study, researchers discussed how when participants expressed concern of

homophobic or transphobic incidents, the school administration and, in some cases, the police did not take such incidents as seriously as other forms of bullying, (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011). So, although there are authority figures at schools that are supposed to handle these situations appropriately, they often do not, which leaves children who identify with being gender diverse even more left out, judged, and isolated than before. Because it is so common for gender fluid children to experience these types of hardships in schools, a way to avoid these kinds of conflicts would be to start incorporating diverse content on gender expression early on in education as to shape open-minded individuals for the future. Since children are able to recognize gender differences at such a young age, and their minds are so malleable at this time, it is beneficial and only makes sense to start incorporating gender diverse lesson plans early in their education. By doing so, this could plant a seed in the child's minds that no matter what gender orientation a person identifies with, they are still a person and still deserves to be respected.

Consideration of Diversity

For my project, I am focusing on how to incorporate gender diverse content into the preschool classroom as an introduction to this new concept. This project is inclusive of diversity because it is going to be addressing an area that may not be represented by current dominant cultural views. My project will be conducted at the Monterey Road Child Development Center, in the Strong Beginnings pre-kindergarten classroom. My project is specifically tailored to preschool students because of the topic I chose for my project, so this lesson would only be applicable for this specific age group. When speaking on gender to this young of a population, I needed to make sure that the content I was exposing them to was age appropriate so that they could start to understand accepting differences in one another. This project could also be applied

specifically to preschool children that have a difficult time expressing acceptance to others who differ from them.

Learning Outcomes

For my project I plan on creating a two-day lesson plan that focuses on gender as a spectrum and being fluid. I am going to be reading a book called *Sparkle Boy* to a classroom of preschoolers and then doing a hands-on activity with them on the second day. This book shows young readers that differences in people are a good thing and although it may be hard to understand or confusing at times, it is acceptable if someone does things a little different than everyone else. After reading the book, I will review it with the students, ask them a few questions about the book, and then do a worksheet activity with them. On the second day I will provide paper dolls for the students and have them create self-portraits.

1. Students are able to identify non-gender conforming items. I will measure this by creating a worksheet and having them pick 3 items they would use if there were no gender roles.
2. Identify positive ways to interact with a child who does not conform to gender roles. I will measure this by asking participants to describe different ways they could be kind and record their answers.
3. Children recognize there are no “girl” or “boy” clothing. I will measure this by having the participants pick a different gendered clothing item and have them apply it to the paper dolls they are creating.

Method

Day 1

The first thing I will do is introduce myself and explain to the class why I am there and what we are going to be doing. Then, I will read the book *Sparkle Boy* by Leslea Newman to the

class. This book is about a young boy who does not conform to gender societal norms and challenges these norms by expressing himself through what he wears. The reading will take approximately 15-25 minutes. Once I am finished reading, I will review the story with the students, clarify the main points of the book, and then answer any questions that the students may have. After this, we will begin to work on a worksheet activity that asks the students to circle items that they thought a Sparkle Boy would enjoy (See Appendix A). Once the students conclude the worksheet activity, I will collect their completed worksheets and that will be the end of the first day of my lesson.

Day 2

On my second day in the class, I will review the story with the students and make sure that they remember what *Sparkle Boy* was about and what the main points of the story were. Once we are done reviewing the book together as a class, I will ask the group of students what are some positive ways to show kindness to others who may be different from them. I will then record their answers on a big sheet of paper. After we are finished completing the list of positive ways to show kindness, we will then move onto the final activity of creating self-portraits through paper dolls (See Appendix B). I will be providing the paper doll materials such as the outfits, pipe cleaners, the paper dolls, and glitter. Although I am providing these materials for the students, it does not limit students to what they can add to their self-portraits because they are also able to draw or make any adjustments that are needed if they wish. First, I will explain the directions of what I want them to do with their paper dolls, which is for them to create a self-portrait of how they truly feel inside and then to also add an item of clothing, or an object, or activity that they thought was just for boys or just for girls and apply it to their self-portraits. During the time that students are creating their self portraits, I will walk around attending to any

students that may need help. Once students are done completing their paper dolls, I will ask each of them why they decided to decorate their paper dolls the way they did, then record their answers on the back of their self-portraits. Then I will ask what the one thing they chose to add to their self-portrait that they thought was just for boys or just for girls was. Once I have finished recording students answers on the back of their completed self-portraits, I will thank the class and teachers for allowing me to come in and implement my lesson in their class and that will complete my two-day lesson plan.

Results

Learning outcome 1 was that the participants would be able to identify non-gender conforming items. In Appendix A, I have provided a photograph of the worksheet that the students worked on for this activity. Out of the 19 students that participated in this activity, 16 of them met this learning outcome because they identified both “girl” and “boy” items that were suitable for a child to play with, one of the students partially met the learning outcome because he only circled items that were normally just for boys, and two students did not meet the outcome at all because they just colored on the worksheet and did not circle any items. I believe this learning outcome was met because more than 84% of the class did the activity correctly.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would be able to identify positive ways to interact with a child who does not conform to gender roles. To measure this, I led a small discussion asking the students what were some ways to show kindness to someone who expresses themselves differently than them. In Appendix B, there is a photograph of a list the class came up with of different ways to show kindness. For learning outcome 2, I do believe it was met because all of the students who chose to respond in the discussion responded with positive ways to show kindness to someone who expresses themselves differently than them.

Learning outcome 3 was that students would recognize that there are no “girl” or “boy” clothing, objects, or activities. As a way to measure this, I had students create paper dolls that represented how they truly felt inside and then had them choose an item of clothing, an object, or activity that they thought was just for girls or just for boys and apply it to themselves in contrast to their sex. In Appendix C, I have provided a photograph of some of the students’ paper dolls. Although I believe this activity was fun for the children to do and that some children did it correctly, I do not think that the learning outcome was particularly met. While explaining the directions to the students, they were all extremely excited to do the activity and I am not quite sure if they were fully paying attention to the directions I was saying. As a result of this most of the students did not add opposite gendered items of clothing, objects, or activities to their portraits. I also do not think this learning outcome was fully met because I did not have sufficient evidence that the learning took place. I was not able to ask each student why they chose to decorate their self-portraits the way they did, which could have provided more evidence of learning.

Discussion

Overall, I believe my project was successful because two out of the three learning outcomes I created were met and the students enjoyed the activities I prepared for the class. I also believe my project was met because after conducting it, I do believe it fulfills the need of incorporating gender diverse content into early education curricula. My results were consistent with the theory I based my project off of because, after completing my two day lesson, most students had shown positive ways to approach someone who was different than them and showed some examples that they did not have to conform to gender norms. This goes back to the theory I used because the Gender Schema Theory (GST) states that individuals become gendered in their

society by the modeling of what others are doing; “this is then maintained and transmitted to other members of culture” (Bem, 1983, p. 603). So, I believe it is important to show the normality of diverse genders early on in individuals lives; such as preschool age. Then, I believe, those individuals will have a better outlook on how they view others that are different than them, whether that be based on gender, race, or age, etc.

If I could do this project over again, ultimately, I would want to become familiar with the students before going in and teaching their class. I would choose to do this because the students who participated were really excited about having a new person lead their class, which was a distraction for them. The next thing I would do differently would be to ensure that I have the same sample size each day I was at the Monterey Road Child Development Center. The first day I was there, I had 19 students participating in the reading and worksheet activity, but on the second day not all the same students were in class, and some students did not wish to participate so they did not have to. The final thing I would do differently would be to layout more time for the activities I created for the students. If I had more time for the activities, I would have had more time to explain the directions of what I wanted the students to do for each of the activities, which then would have maybe made my results more clear.

Ultimately, I believe if children got early exposure to the diversity of gender expression, then it might make children more kind to others who do not conform to their expectations. Much has been said about ethnic diversity in the school environment, but when it comes to gender expression there is very little content children are being exposed to in the school system. Although the participants may not remember everything from my lesson, I hope some of them were able to internalize the message of accepting others for their differences and are able to carry that with them forever. I believe in the big picture, if gender diverse content is implemented into

the school system then it will result in more open-minded and accepting individuals for the future.

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Appendix A

Worksheet Activity

My friend who is a sparkle boy has a birthday coming up and I need help picking out a present for him! If you were a sparkle boy, what are some things you would like to play with or have as a gift? Circle the choices you think my friend would enjoy.



Appendix B

List of ways to show kindness that the class created

Ways to show kindness

- acting nice to them
- say polite words
- Ask nicely to stop behavior
- accepting others
- sharing
- not saying anything
- please & thank you
- using kind words
- you respect other people's words

Appendix C
Paper Doll Activity Examples

